

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 13938

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1

TAGS: UK, PINT

SUBJECT: LIBERAL PARTY BLUES

SUMMARY: ON THE EVE OF ITS ANNUAL ASSEMBLY, THE BRITISH LIBERAL PARTY IS IN A STATE OF ECLIPSE, AND STILL SUFFERS LETDOWN FROM ITS DISAPPOINTING PERFORMANCE IN LAST OCTOBER'S GENERAL ELECTION. END SUMMARY.

1. THE LIBERAL PARTY, ON THE EVE OF ITS 1975 ASSEMBLY SEPTEMBER 15-20 AT SCARBOROUGH, IS IN A STATE OF ECLIPSE. LIBERAL FORTUNES HAVE SLIPPED SUBSTANTIALLY SINCE THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE FEBRUARY AND OCTOBER 1974 GENERAL ELECTIONS WHEN THE PARTY HOPED -- AFTER ITS STRONG SHOWING IN THE FEBRUARY CONTEST -- THAT WITH "ONE MORE HEAVE" IT COULD ACHIEVE THE LONG-AWAITED PARLIAMENTARY BREAKTHROUGH TO 50-100 SEATS AND PARTICIPATION IN A COALITION GOVERNMENT. THE ANTICIPATED BREAKTHROUGH
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BECAME INSTEAD IN OCTOBER A BURST BUBBLE WHEN 13 LIBERAL

MP'S WERE ELECTED, A LOSS OF ONE SEAT. ALTHOUGH ITS NATIONAL VOTE DROPPED ONLY FROM 19.3 PERCENT IN FEBRUARY (6,063,470) TO 18.3 PERCENT IN OCTOBER (5,346,800), THE PARTY'S EXPECTATIONS WERE DEFLATED SERIOUSLY. SCARCELY NOW IN SIGHT, THE LIBERALS STILL SUFFER THE LETDOWN.

2. THE DISAPPOINTING OCTOBER SHOWING WILL BE DEBATED AT SCARBOROUGH. BUT THE HEART OF THE MATTER WAS THE FAILURE OF JEREMY THORPE'S LEADERSHIP AND THE PARTY'S INABILITY TO EXPLOIT THE ECONOMIC ISSUES WHICH PREOCCUPIED THE BRITISH PUBLIC.

3. THORPE IS A HIGH SPIRITED POLITICAL DILETTANTE WHOSE NATURAL METIER IS MUSICAL COMEDY. HE REMAINS MORE ACCOMPLISHED AT FACILE RIPOSTE AND AFTER-DINNER MIMICRY THAN PARTY MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC POLICY. HE HAS PROVIDED LITTLE LEADERSHIP SINCE OCTOBER. A RIPPLE WITHIN THE PARLIAMENTARY LIBERAL PARTY LAST FALL TO HOLD THORPE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE OCTOBER REVERSAL AND THUS REMOVE HIM AS LEADER CAME TO NOTHING. SO THORPE WILL BE HOISTING THE PARTY COLORS AGAIN AT SCARBOROUGH, AND, AS ALWAYS, WITH MORE CEREMONY THAN SUBSTANCE.

4. BUT THE LIBERAL PARTY'S PROBLEMS LAST FALL GO DEEPER THAN THE WEAKNESS OF THORPE. THE PARTY, THEN AS NOW, LACKED CREDIBILITY AS A SERIOUS CONTENDER FOR A SHARE IN RUNNING THE COUNTRY. WITH ONLY 13 MP'S, UNDEFINED OR UNIMAGINATIVE POLICY ALTERNATIVES, AND AN OFTEN INVISIBLE PUBLIC IMAGE, THE PARTY REMAINS MORE AN ODDITY THAN A FORCE IN BRITISH POLITICS.

5. SO THE LIBERALS TROOP TO SCARBOROUGH WITH SPLINTERED HOPES. BUT THEY ALSO CARRY ONE UNDIMINISHED DREAM: ELECTORAL REFORM TO ACHIEVE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION AND MULTI-MEMBER CONSTITUENCIES FOR THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION. THEY POINT OUT THAT 10.5 MILLION CONSERVATIVE VOTES AT THE LAST ELECTION SECURED 276 SEATS IN THE COMMONS COMPARED WITH 13 SEATS CAPTURED BY 5.5 MILLION LIBERAL VOTES. ELEVEN AND A HALF MILLION LABOR VOTES ELECTED 319 MP'S. ALTHOUGH THERE IS CONSIDERABLE MERIT

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IN THE LIBERAL'S COMPLAINT, THE CHANCES OF A MAJORITY OF SITTING LABOR AND TORY MP'S VOTING FOR ELECTORAL REFORM WHICH WOULD IN MANY CASES, DEPRIVE THEM OF THEIR SEATS, SEEM REMOTE. THIS THEME OF REFORM OF THE UK ELECTORAL SYSTEM IS SURE TO BE AN IMPORTANT -- PERHAPS THE CENTRAL -- ISSUE DISCUSSED AT SCARBOROUGH. IT IS UNLIKELY TO SWAY PARLIAMENT OR THE BRITISH VOTER. NEITHER FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE IS THE LIBERAL PARTY.

RICHARDSON

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